

THE MODEL PARTNERSHIP



# Key Element 5

## *Celebrate & Evaluate*



Near the Tennessee  
River NWR, Tennessee

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This is a short chapter, but the topic of celebration and evaluation is another important aspect of creating a sustainable and successful Friends/Refuge collaboration.

**M**olly Krival, NWRS Friends Mentor, writes: “Another issue is more serious than it sounds: Friends and staff need to be recognized, achievements celebrated even when they are not directly involved with projects. Applause and various types of thanks/honors should be built-in.”

Healthy sustainable partnerships create a culture of ongoing evaluation, celebration and rewards where partners celebrate their relationship and the individuals as much as the successes themselves.

When evaluation is performed as part of every meeting (the small steps) and as part of a strategic process (every year), it brings energy to the organization because everyone recognizes the progress being made. Ongoing evaluation makes ongoing celebration possible—you don’t have to wait until a major goal is achieved, but can celebrate completing the small steps along the way. Celebration builds trust and tightens the bonds of the relationship. Celebration increases involvement and participation in the partnership because people feel satisfied that they are making a contribution that is noticed, welcomed and valued by others.

## Evaluation

Evaluation is a positive and essential experience. Evaluating progress is the only way to know if the collaboration is meeting its goals. Regular evaluation helps partners make course changes, as needed. If something isn’t working as well as expected, ongoing evaluation will help identify the problems before it becomes too late to fix them or resources are wasted. Too often evaluation is left to the end of a project or is not performed at all, and that may lead to burnout and discouragement because partners haven’t recognized their accomplishments.

The following approaches are helpful in performing evaluations (from Winer and Ray):

- View evaluation as reflection. Avoid assuming that the chosen actions are the best or only way to achieve results. Be open to modifying and improving collaborative actions.
- Integrate evaluation into the work. Evaluation needs to be integral to the efforts of the partners.



- Tailor evaluation to the stage of collaboration. Remember that there is not one model or one outcome for a Friends/Refuge to be successful. The results must be measured based on local experience.
- Use quantitative and qualitative evaluation methods.
- Evaluate both the results and the processes being used.
- Appreciate failure. “Be up-front about aborted efforts or fiascoes...see the failure as a learning opportunity.”
- Expect multiple results. Many variables influence outcomes and experiences and members of the collaboration will view outcomes from a variety of different perspectives. These multiple responses to multiple results make it possible to realize success from a variety of different angles and makes for a richer evaluation process.

Molly Krival offers the following questions as practical queries your group could ask to evaluate progress on a project or a committee report:

- Is the predicted timeline working out?
- Have you found the people you need, the skills, the funding?
- Should the board be offering more help to a committee?
- How do you recommend changing the original plan?
- Has the whole project been superseded by an unexpected more important need?

Each partnership should decide how to incorporate evaluation. A one-page checklist could be developed and used to guide discussion as needed.

Perhaps the most important recommendation about evaluation is *don't forget to do it*. Remember that each refuge, each situation each collaboration is unique. An evaluation is a measure of *each* Friends/Refuge collaboration's success in accomplishing locally defined goals. Partners must resist the temptation to gauge outcomes against the successes reported by other Friends/Refuge collaborations.



## Evaluating Friends/Refuge Accomplishments

Evaluation doesn't have to be complicated. As Brian O'Connell has observed (1993): "It can be as basic as deciding what you want to achieve by the end of the year and then figuring out later if you got there." Evaluation starts with an attainable goal to be accomplished at a realistic date, with a prior commitment "to stop what you're doing on that date to look back to see if your goal was actually reached."

As members of Friends/Refuge collaborations, NWRS Friends Mentors have experienced their own challenges and successes. NWRS Friends Mentors Tim Armstrong, Friends President, and Mike Blenden, Complex Manager, at San Luis Valley NWRC relay this story:

Armstrong recently found himself lamenting to Manager Blenden that he didn't feel the Friends had accomplished enough since they were formed seven years ago. As they talked, Blenden pointed out achievements Armstrong had forgotten. Together they decided that a simple "accomplishment presentation" was in order. They listed every project the Friends had accomplished and created a chronological Power Point presentation. They were astounded by how much the Friends had done, none of which would have happened had the collaboration not been formed. This realization was both sobering and motivating.

Armstrong and Blenden now show the Power Point presentation on the mentoring visits they make to show fledgling groups what a small, committed group of volunteers can do on rural refuges. They used the presentation to solicit support for a fall 2006 migratory bird festival from their local Chamber of Commerce. They also showed the presentation to members of the entire Friends organization, most of whom had forgotten many of the amazing things they had done.

They plan on updating the San Luis accomplishments presentation at least once a year and providing it to potential board members who are considering joining the organization. Armstrong and Blenden are confident they can recruit new members more easily when people can see they are joining an organization that has a successful track record. □

### FRIENDS OF SAN LUIS VALLEY NWRC

#### Accomplishments

- Provided maps of the Complex for visitors
- Provide refreshments at refuge events
- Staff the Refuge office and Visitor's Center during festivals and the summer months
- Built an interpretive trail and studied the impact of visitor use of the trail on nesting birds
- Sponsor monthly workdays during the summer
- Publish a quarterly newsletter
- Sponsor prizes at the regional Science Fair for conservation-related projects
- Sponsor special field trips for members only
- Host an annual Friends and Neighbors picnic for neighboring landowners
- Maintain a website ([www.slvrefuges.org](http://www.slvrefuges.org))
- Provide Refuge outreach at local festivals to raise awareness of National Wildlife Refuges
- Sponsor a K-12 Feathered Friends art contest
- Write grants for refuge projects
- Fundraise
- Accept donations at the Refuge
- Lobbied for a \$324,000 Congressional appropriation for operations and maintenance funding for the Baca NWR
- Sponsored debate on a state ballot issue
- Partner with other local conservation groups
- Purchase educational supplies for the Refuge
- Help lead field trips for school groups on the Refuge
- Assist with an annual spring Crane Festival
- Sponsor an annual fall Kid's Crane Festival



## Celebration and Rewards

Members of successful Friends/Refuge collaborations consistently put having fun at the top of the list of their keys to success. Having fun is what makes people want to keep coming back for more.

Feeling good about accomplishments gives everyone a sense of personal pride in the organization. Having fun prevents stagnation, smoothes conflicts and nurtures relationships. It's the glue that holds a collaboration together. Here are some tips:

■ *Decide what types of rewards and celebrations are important.* As you begin the collaboration, and as new members join, it's worth having a discussion about what rewards are important to each individual, what would make them feel appreciated what would they enjoy doing. Consider how to celebrate not only accomplishments, but how to reward and recognize the individual members of the collaboration as well—the board, volunteers, Refuge staff, the manager. For many people, personal recognition—even a simple “thank you” for a job well done—is the most important token of appreciation one can offer.

■ *Integrate celebration into the day-to-day culture of the collaboration.* Don't wait until the end of a project to celebrate. Use action plans and evaluation tools to identify small and large milestones. Each meeting can include time to acknowledge and celebrate the work done by individuals and completion of objectives. Special, more

formal celebrations should be scheduled at regular intervals during the year.

■ *Celebrate the partnership not just the accomplishments.* Plan to set aside time on a regular basis to celebrate the relationship itself—a special refuge tour, specially scheduled social time before a meeting, a pot-luck dinner. This helps build trust as the relationships become more personal.

■ *Celebration is a way to prevent burnout.* Celebrating maintains enthusiasm and keeps things positive. It makes people feel good. It keeps them interested and they feel valued, rewarded and satisfied with their affiliation with the organization. Having fun brings positive energy to the relationship—energy that will ensure a long-term life for the collaboration.

To conclude, creating a sustainable Friends/Refuge collaboration requires a serious commitment by everyone involved, but it also reaps tremendous rewards. FWS Mentor and Manager of Blackwater NWR, Glenn Carowan, sums up the vision Mentors have for the Friends/Refuge collaborations when he says: “We'd like to see Friends groups rise to their most important level of responsibility: Looking out for the System as a whole—raising the visibility of the System within the country, one community at a time.” □

## Putting it all Together— The Sustainable Friends/Refuge Collaboration

Across the country there are a handful of Friends partnerships that exceed regular expectations. Because all refuges and affiliated Friends are unique, there really cannot be a single overall model for a Friends group. However, any Friends/Refuge partners eager to create a sustainable collaboration will benefit from studying the process and accomplishments of the Friends of Blackwater NWR—a highly successful Friends organization located in a rural area.

Ron Tiller, a former Blackwater Friends president and FWS Mentor, says, “It’s a myth that Friends can’t really *do* anything in a rural community. Blackwater NWR is in a rural area. You have to *want* to come to the refuge to find us. The closest ‘city,’ Cambridge (population 11,000), is about 18 miles away and the county has only about 31,000 people in a 558 square mile area.”

A rural location can make it complicated for Friends to build membership and find volunteers. There is a limited population from which to draw helpers, so the same people face multiple demands for their time. It may be challenging to find funds because the same sources sustain multiple requests. How have the Friends of Blackwater NWR overcome these challenges? The answer is that its members and the Refuge management and staff have dedicated themselves to the principles of building a sustainable collaboration.

### A Solid Collaboration

The Friends and Refuge have worked hard over many years to build their collaboration. They have created a culture that nurtures and encourages personal, trusting and respectful relationships. Expectations are clear. Good communications systems are in place. And everyone takes responsibility for success of the collaboration.

Ron Tiller emphasizes Friends must feel welcome at the refuge and have a good relationship with the staff. He observes that Manager Glenn Carowan offers leadership by saying to staff: “We’ve got to work with the Friends—give them all the support you can.” The relationship is such that Tiller knew he could call Carowan at home at 9:00 or 10:00 in the evening if there was a need to discuss something—just as he might with any trusted friend.

### BLACKWATER AT A GLANCE

#### The Refuge

- Established in 1933 as a refuge for migratory birds
- Located on the Eastern Shore of Maryland near Cambridge (Pop. ~11,000).
- Over 27,000 acres, mostly rich tidal marsh. Other habitat types include freshwater ponds, mixed evergreen and deciduous forests and small amounts of cropland and managed impoundments that are seasonally flooded for waterfowl use.
- Visit <[www.fws.gov/blackwater](http://www.fws.gov/blackwater)>

#### The Friends

Established: 1987  
640 memberships: (about 800+ members)  
Annual Budget/Expenses: >\$100,000  
Visit <[www.friendsofblackwater.org](http://www.friendsofblackwater.org)>

#### Mission

To support the purposes of the Blackwater NWR by working for the protection, preservation and enhancement of these precious public lands through advocacy, environmental education and outreach programs.

#### Accomplishments

- NWRA/NFWF Friends Group of the Year 2003
- Expanded bookstore and gift shop profits
- Took over management of the hunt program
- Implemented a popular educational website
- Funded and installed video cameras on an osprey nest and eagle’s aerie shown in the visitor center and on the website
- Secured grants for: a 20 mile paddling trail through the Refuge; five miles of two new hiking trails; building a new observation floor and library.

## Strategic Thinking

Glenn Carowan notes: “People are always amazed that anytime we do anything, we always bring in the Friends first and discuss how the Friends fit—what they can do and how to use Friends resources strategically.” For example, Friends participate along with the staff in Refuge planning retreats, which occur every one to two years. “We don’t look at the weeds...we look at the entire program and what we want to focus on, two or three ideas. We use the Friends for input on what they see—the community pulse. It helps us think about how the community views the Refuge.”

Manager Carowan reports many benefits from including the Friends in refuge planning, including:

- Helps the Refuge more effectively use all of its resources;
- Builds the relationship with the Friends;
- Generates new ideas from the community; and
- Builds consensus up front, rather than after the fact,

This has been critical to the Friends success. Tiller observes that “Glenn Carowan includes the Friends at strategic planning sessions as part of the ‘staff.’ He makes us feel *part* of the Refuge organization—a part of everything they do. We wouldn’t be anywhere near where we are today if we were treated as the ‘stepchildren’.”

## A Well-Managed Organization

In its 20+ year history, the Friends of Blackwater have been through four developmental stages:

1. The first stage focused on getting board members—they spent time volunteering and becoming known in the community.
2. In the next stage, the Friends tackled their first project: they launched a small bookstore and hired its part-time staff. The Friends at first thought they were making money from the store. In reality it was losing money—sales grossed about \$3,000, but

all proceeds went to pay the bookstore manager. After assessing the situation, the board decided to keep the store, but make substantial changes. A board member volunteered to dedicate the countless hours it required to improve the store and make it profitable. Today, the store annually grosses over \$100,000.

3. In 1999, twelve years after the Friends inception, the board reorganized and moved to a committee structure. This revision was a key element in the advancement of the organization. Tiller notes: “I firmly believe that the way the board is structured is critical to how the group works. We used to have meetings that were 3 to 3 ½ hours long—everyone got into everyone else’s business and chewed up ideas. Now, if you want to be on the board, you have to donate \$1,000 in cash or in-kind, chair one committee and participate in another. When we made this change, we lost four board members, but the board members we have now are serious. We have good control over our meetings, which run about one hour and focus on committee reports. If someone says ‘I have a better idea’ they are asked to join the committee.”

In addition to improving board function, the committee structure has helped build in a system to generate new members and leaders. Committee chairs are responsible to recruit volunteers for their committees and find replacements for themselves when they are ready to step down. This system makes everyone responsible for ensuring the overall future of the board and organization.

4. The committee structure has now enabled the Friends to focus successfully on multiple projects. Education and outreach are high priorities. The Friends have built an educational building, ornithological library and observatory. They are reaching out more to the community and working with the school system. They have developed extensive resources available for educators.

As an aside, Manager Carowan comments that too much emphasis is being placed by the FWS and Friends on “We’ve got to have a visitor center. We’ve got to raise \$1 million.” > >



He reminds us “Blackwater has been in business since 1987. We didn’t take on a multi-million dollar project in 1989. The visitor center has been the last thing Blackwater has tackled. It’s important to be realistic—identify what can be accomplished, make it happen and build on the accomplishments.”

While the Blackwater experience offers invaluable insights about the evolution of collaboration, remember that each partnership is unique. The accomplishments of each collaboration must be measured against its set of vision and goals, not the successes of another group. Indeed, Tim Armstrong, FWS Mentor, Friends of San Luis Valley NWRs, says it well:

*“We have to be careful about setting up expectations that every Friends group needs to be like the handful of big, highly successful groups in the country. The majority of Friends are relatively small and many will never be raising lots of money or members. They need to define success based on their own measures... While it’s important for Board members to understand and meet their roles and responsibilities, it’s also important, especially for small groups, to realize it’s okay to stay in the early stage of board development. That’s fine if you have enthusiasm and some change over—you don’t need to have a big institutional board.”*

It is quite acceptable for a collaboration to remain rather small —provided it keeps moving forward. The Blackwater partnership enjoys a twenty-plus year history, and its greatest successes have occurred over the last seven or eight years. Most Refuge Friends groups are very young and have much to learn. Perhaps the most important lesson is what has remained true throughout the Blackwater collaboration’s life cycle: there must be strength in the relationship and everyone must subscribe to a clear vision. These are things that sustain any Friends/Refuge collaboration and lead to a future filled with success.

When Glenn Carowan was asked what he thought was the greatest success for the Friends/Refuge collaboration at Blackwater, he responded:

*“The greatest contribution Friends of Blackwater NWR has made is how they have integrated the Refuge into the community and the community into the Refuge. We send the wrong message when we say ‘the Friends role is to raise money.’ This is not the most important role of Friends. Integrating the Refuge with the community is what it’s all about. If we’re not doing that, we as a System, fail.” □*